

WAR AND PEACE IN IAN MCEWAN'S *ATONEMENT*

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A dozen years after its publication Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) has already become a classic in the panorama of contemporary fiction. Written by what the media recognize as "England's national author,"¹ sponsored by the planetary fortunes of the Oscar-winning film version starring Keira Knightley, James McAvoy and Vanessa Redgrave, and generally reviewed as a literary masterpiece, the novel possesses three key elements that perfectly mesh together to make it a milestone of its time. The first section of the plot opens with a description of what seems to be an average summer day for the wealthy Tallis family. The story starts in the English countryside in 1935 and narrates the episodes occurring to Briony Tallis, a 13 year-old girl with a penchant for creative writing, that she fully demonstrates at work as she is busy with the script of a drama. Meanwhile, her 22 year old sister Cecilia, somewhat controversially falls in love with the handsome and tough Robbie, her childhood friend and son of the charlady Grace Turner. Briony however misreads their passionate exchange and wrongly accuses him of rape, an accusation that throws him into prison. This appears to be the episode around which the whole plot revolves and a point of no return in the story: McEwan himself, in *Enduring Love*, tags it "the explosion of consequences."² Richard Bradford identifies this as "a persistent element" in the fiction of Ian McEwan, and describes it

¹ D. ZALEWSKI. "The Background Hum. Ian McEwan's Art of Unease" in *The New Yorker*, 23rd February 2009.

² I. MCEWAN. *Enduring Love*. Random House, London, 1997, p. 18.

as tectonic, a sense of two strata or planes of existence coming together, perhaps through an accident, with consequences that are numinous with significance but rarely explained.³

Back to the plot of the novel, World War II starts and Robbie gains freedom in exchange for signing up to fight for England in France. Section two then follows his flee backwards from the front when, along with the rest of the allied troops, the British army retreats to Dunkirk. Set in a nightmarish background, the episodes of his escape throw light on Robbie's determination to survive mainly with the idea to join Cecilia, who has broken with her family and is now waiting for him at home. In the third part of the plot, still set during the war but in London, the focus returns to Briony who feels responsible for having damaged the existence of the two lovers and, as a form of reparation, decides to become a nurse and totally dedicate herself to others. She is relieved to see however that now Cecilia and Robbie live together, and he has managed to reach the motherland safely. In this long, absorbing narration the reader has the chance to become familiar with a conspicuous number of surprising episodes, that however pale when compared with the disclosure one is confronted with during the coda to the plot. In 1999, about sixty years after the last scenes just described, we are plainly told that the story narrated is not true but it is a sweetened account of the real events that now Briony, a novelist of established reputation, has invented in order to atone for her past blunder. Cecilia and Robbie in fact never met again, both of them having died in 1940.

As this concise summary of the plot already illustrates, the story of *Atonement* develops on the wide canvas of mid XX century's continental history, with some of the events surrounding the second world conflict clearly emerging as a privileged point of view. It is exactly this perspective that critics highlight when they argue for instance that *Atonement* may also be defined as a "historical novel,"⁴ or alternatively that, due to the frame in which the plot unfolds, the "novel also belongs to the genre of war literature."⁵ War indeed plays a

³ R. BRADFORD. *The Novel Now. Contemporary British Fiction*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, p. 18.

⁴ P. CHILDS. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=3041>, accessed 04 September 2013.

⁵ J. ELLAM. *Ian McEwan's Atonement*. Continuum, London, 2009, p. 18.

pivotal role in the economy of the story both as a real historical event and – as I intend to demonstrate here – as a metaphor enabling the narrator to profoundly manipulate the emotional response of the main characters, as well as that of the readers. This effect appears even more evident, as one observes the narrator skillfully juxtaposing brief (real or imagined) moments when normal peaceful situations are spotlighted on to war-time scenes: these moments of harmony have the task of intensifying the range of the friction between war and peace and ultimately sharpen the disturbing impact that conflicts have on the fabric of this novel.

In order for us to fully comprehend how and where the shock of war originates, we need to refer to the structure of McEwan's work. Of the various intertexts scattered through the pages of *Atonement* I will refer here to Virginia Woolf, whose function as literary source is even plainly disclosed by the narrator when ironically a reference is made to the closeness between the fictional style of Briony's novella *Two Figures by the Fountain* and "the techniques of Mrs. Woolf."⁶ However, while Zalewski [Zalewski, 2009], Bentley⁷ and Dyer⁸ have pointed to *Mrs. Dalloway* and D'Angelo⁹ to *Jacob's Room* as novels providing an appropriate frame for McEwan's pastiche, I will evaluate the affinities between *To the Lighthouse* and *Atonement* or better, between *To the Lighthouse* and Briony's novel contained within *Atonement*. Of the four sections, I will mainly restrict my analysis to the first three parts of the plot, a selection that already manifestly alludes to Woolf's masterpiece, structured in three main parts.

It is interesting to record that while *To the Lighthouse* and *Atonement* narrate stories developing over a significant span of time, they both open with a considerably long first section with the narrator focussed on the events occurring on a single summer day. The close relationship between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe shapes the story in *To the Lighthouse*, where the two women are presented as friends but they happen to symbolically play the roles of mother and daughter. On a

⁶ I. MCEWAN. *Atonement*, Vintage, London, 2005 [2001], p. 312.

⁷ N. BENTLEY. *Contemporary British Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2008, p. 151.

⁸ G. DYER. "Who's Afraid of Influence?" *The Guardian*, Saturday 22 September 2001.

⁹ K. D'ANGELO. "To Make a Novel': The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (spring 2009), pp. 97-98.

parallel level, the relationship between the two sisters Cecilia and Briony in *Atonement* describes a similar situation where the two girls also end up playing the roles of mother and daughter, due to their mother's evasiveness. It is worth mentioning also that in the two novels the female character playing the daughter's role is an artist frustrated by her inability to bring her work to conclusion. In addition, towards the end of this opening section both Woolf and McEwan construct a scene where a family and its guests gather for dinner and two characters disappear: in Woolf this escape has light romantic undertones, while in McEwan it creates disturbance and transports the story towards dramatic consequences.

The alternation between peace and war is clearly introduced in the second section of the novels, where the two narrators abruptly switch to a war scenario. The shift of the setting also brings about a change in the use of the language and style of narration that suspends a realistic mode in favour of a poetic tone (Woolf) or a hallucinative and oneiric mood (McEwan). The gap is such that readers may find themselves disoriented in this change: in a recent study, Crosthwaite writes about McEwan's narrative strategy "that is suggestive of what psychologists term "dissociation" or "numbing" – a common mode of response to overwhelming experience."¹⁰ In both cases, section two registers the death of two characters: in *To the Lighthouse* this is explicitly said, while *Atonement* covers this fact and shocks its readers when it forces them to rewind the tape of the story and correct the fatal information.

After the trauma of section two, the final part of the story is intended to restore peace. The narrator of *To the Lighthouse* manages to close a circle when the sail to the lighthouse is finally carried out, and a sense of peace and completeness descends on the fictional work. It is in this situation that McEwan most evidently distances his fiction from that of Woolf: while it remains true that Briony's novel (momentarily) alleviates the reader's tension when surprisingly the two romantic lovers are again found together and still passionately in love with each other, there remains a disturbing conflict between this achieved sense of peace and the upsetting effects of war that Briony keeps on witnessing in her hospital ward. Both novels however reach completion when the artist achieves creative self-realisation and her

¹⁰ P. CROSTHWAITE. "Speed, War, and Traumatic Affect: Reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" *Cultural Politics*, 2007, Volume 3, Issue 1, p. 54.

work is finished. In *Atonement*, artistic realization is reached in the epilogue of the novel.

This comparative analysis intends to demonstrate what *Atonement* owes to *To The Lighthouse* in terms of inner design and structure but it also shows how remarkably distinct the two works are when their final meaning is laid bare in front of the reader. If Virginia Woolf in fact creates a fictional work whose structure insists on the duality of light and darkness, and giving a much wider breath to the sections dedicated to light, Ian McEwan turns this equation upside down and constructs a tale where peace may be said to occupy the same room as war only on a fictional level, because what dominates his novel is the overpowering impact of war that no calm whatsoever can erase or domesticate. In a paper focussed on the relationship between *Atonement* and the fiction of Jane Austen, another basic literary source for McEwan's fictional masterpiece, Juliette Wells stresses in a similar way that the weight of war in *Atonement* far exceeds that found in the novels of Austen as the scholar writes that "the 'atrocities' [...] perpetrated in McEwan's novel, including rape and war crimes, are much more horrible than anything depicted by Austen."¹¹ War, therefore, has a major impact on the overall dimension of bitterness and unhelpfulness that dominate the story: in addition, its power is most sharply felt through the pungent contrast with peace.

The centrality of the concept of war, however, does not only find proper expression on a historical level, because in the hands of McEwan it is skilfully turned into a kind of a network connecting various scenes, deeply shaping characters and establishing nexuses. If in fact the idea of conflict clearly emerges as the traumatic representation of World War II, it slowly but inescapably penetrates other neighbouring areas and exactly like an epidemic it affects, influences and ultimately kills whatever happens to be within reach. An example of how McEwan adopts this strategy may be observed as we evaluate the development of the story of the Tallises. In the first section of the novel the Tallis family is an ordinary English family where parents are virtually absent but their void is filled by the life and emotions of their three children who, despite minor gaps, are visibly attached to one another. Leon's return home is charged with his sisters' expectations and mixed

¹¹ J. WELLS. "Shades of Austen in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*". *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, N° 30, p. 102.

feelings, not only for Briony who dedicates the performance of *The Trials of Arabella* to him, but also for Cecilia, whose significant consideration for him drives her to think about Leon's friend and host as a possible future husband for just a little while. Of the relationship between Cecilia and Briony I have already said that it looks like a mother-daughter relationship and it is characterized by the clear nuances of an Electra complex. This is further exemplified by Briony's choice to amend for her past wrongdoing by following her sister's path and becoming a nurse like her. However, inside this (seemingly) peaceful enclosure, balances are shockingly shattered one hot summer day, and war erupts. Parallel to the historical events triggering the major conflict on a world scale, in fact the microcosm of the Tallis family replicates the clashes, fights and divisions of the unfolding war. This is effectively rendered in section two of *Atonement*, where the choice of the point of view close to Robbie Turner enables the narrator to switch easily between the conflicts in the real world and in the 'Tallis' world, Robbie's external and inner reality. While retreating to Dunkirk, Robbie meets a couple of French brothers, whose friendly exchanges establish the rhetoric of the us/them typical of a two-parties division:

Henry Bonnet said, 'All the fighting we did twenty-five years ago. All those dead. Now the Germans back in France. In two days, they'll be here, taking everything we have. Who would have believed it?'

Turner felt, for the first time, the full ignominy of the retreat. He was ashamed. He said, with even less conviction than before, 'We'll be back to throw them out, I promise you.' [McEwan, 2001: 201]

On his way toward safety, Robbie finds solace and a reason to resist the madness of war by constantly evading from the sight of death and suffering by thinking about Cecilia. Just a few pages after the brief dialogue between Bonnet and Turner, we become aware of the full conflict splitting the Tallises apart, similarly evoked with the us/them dichotomy. In addition, Bonnet's incredulous 'Who would have believed it?' seems to link the disbelief of the French for the war to the parallel destiny of the Tallises where, if a clash could have been imagined a few years before, it should have involved the parents, for their patent neglect of care towards the family. This is however the

poignant warfare state on the Tallises battlefield as envisaged by Cecilia in her letter to Robbie:

As for the rest of them, I can never forgive what they did. Now that I've broken away, I'm beginning to understand the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity. My mother never forgave you your first. My father preferred to lose himself in his work. Leon turned out to be a grinning, spineless idiot who went along with anybody else. [...] They didn't want their case to be messed up. I know I sound bitter, but my darling, I don't want to be. I'm honestly happy with my new life and my new friends. I feel I can breathe now. Most of all, I have you to live for. Realistically, there had to be a choice – you or them. How could it be both? I've never had a moment's doubt. [McEwan, 2001: 201]

An evaluation of the two lovers' destinies may lead us at this juncture to analyse more in depth how the issue of war evolves in the plot and shapes events because exactly in the same way as one may argue that *Atonement* is a novel within a novel, so Robbie and Cecilia can be said to fight a war within a war. They soon appear to be the romantic couple *par excellence* because harmony and peace reign as long as their feelings remain dormant; however, as soon as a fatal spark makes them aware of their mutual attraction, their world is doomed to collapse under the bangs of society's lies, hypocrisy, injustice and wickedness. The association between their love and the adversities it brings about is so close that one may even wonder whether they are so romantic because their mutual love creates a huge impediment for them or whether their passionate and idealistic feeling remains shaped in terms of a defensive reaction towards hardships and possibly strengthened by external obstacles. Be it as it may, from the moment of their first (and interrupted) effusion they will no longer have peace: Cecilia breaks from her family and renounces the benefits of her social status, while possibly Robbie, "depicted as enduring all the misery in heroic terms," [Ellam, 2009: 44] has even a tougher way. It is here that McEwan is in his element when reality becomes most "disturbing or skewed" [Dyer, 2001], fully and sadly reveals the incongruity of the two lovers' position who understandably criticize Briony for being "such a fantasist" [McEwan, 2001: 212] or "a silly hysterical little girl" [McEwan, 2001: 209] but, exactly as the protagonist had done before, they take shelter from the bitterness of their predicament by totally

plunging – and protecting their love-story – into their formidable imagination. The feeling of overall poignancy dominating *Atonement* is in fact determined by the narrator's intention to demonstrate that if ordinary life is an alternation of peace and war, the former lives in the realm of imagination, whereas only the latter is real and, of course, also Cecilia and Robbie strongly help to validate this theorization. Prisoners of an unwanted war – both in a real and a metaphorical sense – Cecilia and Robbie find their only moments of peace in their imagination. After being shockingly catapulted from the first section setting in a peaceful English countryside to a war-time no-man's-land, the reader learns that, as a consequence to a sequel of dramatic evolutions, the fondness between the two victimised lovers still holds because "Robbie and Cecilia had been making love for years – by post." [McEwan, 2001: 205] On his part, Robbie fights his war – this time more in a metaphorical than in a real sense – fuelled by the illusion that again peace may descend on him and Cecilia. That Robbie and Cecilia fight a war within a war only supported by the weapon of imagination becomes a *leitmotiv* in the plot that, especially in the second section of the novel, the narrator uses in order to stress the sad pointlessness of their reaction. Page 208, for instance, provides two examples of this strategy when the narrating voice juxtaposes Robbie's harsh reality of war with a dream of love and peace. "His anxiety was not for the fighting he might have to do, but for the threat to their Wiltshire dream" [McEwan, 2001: 208] so that no alternative solutions are provided "And so they continued to cling to their hopes." [McEwan, 2001: 208] The famous and bittersweet refrain "I'll wait for you. Come back" [McEwan, 2001: 265] that so many times rings in the second section of the novel and that holds a terrific sway on Robbie, should be placed in this context where peaceful dreams are supposed to fight back the real carnage of a war. The full dramatic and saddening potential of the novel therefore also arises out of this unfair struggle or, in different terms, of the realistic awareness and forced acceptance that no alternative solutions are offered to wash the cruelty of war away, unless one desperately closes one's eyes and takes shelter in one's dreams and imagination.

Evidently enough, the victimised role of the two lovers makes them two champions on a moral level. In particular, the figure of Robbie, who dreams about love (oral sex) and peace becomes the touchstone on which an entire moral system can be properly measured: in this sense,

Paul Marshall, who explicitly dreams about a war scenario, is clearly placed on the opposite side as Robbie's on the weighing up of the characters' principles. Variouslly described as "a thuggish, lecherous businessman" [Crosthwaite, 2007: 55], "brutish" [Crosthwaite, 2007: 55], or "anti-hero" [Ellam, 2009: 53] by the critics, he seems to stage Robbie's wicked self, a sort of double. Whereas Robbie in fact dreams about peace, he dreams about war, if Robbie is an innocent young man who is wrongly believed to be a rapist, Paul actually is one artfully disguised as a gentleman behind an unashamed mask of decorum. In few words, where one is the hero – "the medical prince" [McEwan, 2001: 371] is his last definition before the novel finishes – of the plot, the other is the villain, and it may be interesting to stress that in this novel the villain survives while the hero dies. Should we follow the ordinary rule in stories on doubles, where one of the two selves kills the other, we may have that war is the weapon used by Paul to eliminate Robbie.

Another case that in many ways may seem to show a number of affinities with Robbie's and that perpetrates the unfair struggle between peaceful dreams as opposed to wartime reality is illustrated in a minor tale which pungently celebrates the gloomy and heart-rending atmosphere looming over the entire plot. For a number of reasons the story of the French soldier Luc Cornet, in fact, sends us back to the case of Robbie Turner because, exactly as the English character had done in section two of the novel, so he is fighting a war within the war in section three. In this context the connection between the French and the English soldier is clearly set in Briony's mind who compassionately assists Luc Cornet in his dramatic crossing from life to death while possibly overlapping the figures of the two soldiers: if her entire occupation as a nurse is clearly shaped in terms of an amendment to her original sin towards Robbie, the episode revolving around Luc Cornet's fate makes this process sharply evident. Indeed the battle for Luc's own private war – a nice rhetorical device obviously referring to his (desperate) struggle for survival – manifestly insists on the real and truthful aspect of war in contrast to the imaginary and, ultimately, illusionary face of peace. Nick Bentley correctly points out that

Luc is delirious and in her attempt to console him Briony accepts the fiction that she is his fiancée. Unlike the events in Part One, a fiction

imposed upon reality is seen to have positive effects in that it eases the boy's death. [Bentley, 2008: 152]

The reader has in fact the sharp feeling that in Briony's mind Luc's trespassing is exploited in order to restate a kind of balance with her troubled conscience, in this situation triggering on a minor scale the same mechanism that makes the whole novel turn around: amendment to telling a lie is achieved by telling another lie. Her lie that she loves him, just as he gives in to a hallucinating state on the verge of his fatal passage, in fact insists on the theorem that in this fictional context a momentary illusion may be an appropriate way out to countering the shocking truth of a slaughter on a mass scale. It remains intriguing that, after her illusionary love declaration to Luc, she needs to add that "No other reply was possible" [McEwan, 2001: 309] that appears to be at the same time both an explanation and a justification of this strategy employed by the nurse/novelist. In retrospect, one may have the feeling that Briony in this situation prepares the reader for the appalling revelation he/she will be forced to face some 60 pages later.

As one may imagine, the alternation of peace and war also has a considerable influence on the shaping of the protagonist/narrator of *Atonement*, and I will deal with a couple of situations in which Briony's traumatized conscience is shocked by this rotation. War is a crime and throughout the plot it is strictly associated with Briony's crime so that, conversely, peace becomes related to atonement. War is in fact the next episode described in the plot after Briony has told (and insisted on) the fatal lie, so that the reader starts imagining a connection between the two events, as if the former were the direct consequence of the latter. It is attention-grabbing indeed that in Briony's (self-centred) mind no other incident between the summer of 1935 and the dramatic retreat to Dunkirk in 1940 have a place in the narration, thus reinforcing the weight of her responsibility on the consequences of the conflict. No implications from her family, no involvements from the police force or the magistrates called to judge the case, no contributions from a biased social system seem to have any bearing on the plot, as well as on Briony's tortured conscience. The eruption of war, therefore, while staging in full details the thrilling evolutions of a historical event, also has the purpose of portraying the state of mind of a troubled conscience that is at war with its own past and cannot accept or forgive having committed a mistake with such destructive

consequences. In this sense, we may as well say that the second World War is also the metaphorical description of an inner conflict in which a part of Briony's self harshly criticizes the other half's inconsiderate behaviour. In this regard I cannot but register my total agreement with Julie Ellam's comment that "Briony's self-flagellation [seems] wrapped up as atonement" [Ellam, 2009: 45] because her self-absorption, nearly on the threshold of narcissism, leads her to shape a fiction that perseveres on a Crime and (Self-)Punishment vicious circle. At the same time, it is interesting to consider that also this metaphorical reading of the shifting of war and peace finds confirmation in the general theory that in this story only war really exists, while peace lives on a fictional level. Since Briony is completely helpless before the development of the tragic historical events occurring during World War II, her atonement is confined to an artistic dimension, because only on this condition may art – that McEwan in this novel strives to demonstrate is a fib – repair the wrongdoing of a lie. This strident association and pairing of art with morality substantiates *Atonement*, so that Frank Kermode convincingly argued that "to be disquieting has always been [McEwan's] ambition."¹²

Finally, the second way in which the discourse on war and peace becomes relevant to the characterization of Briony Tallis appears in the fourth section of the novel, where the narrator-protagonist writes about her being diagnosed with vascular dementia. Quite against the reader's possible expectation, Briony's reaction is not dramatized at all but, says the narrator, "I wasn't distressed, not at first. On the contrary, *I was elated* and urgently wanted to tell my closest friends." [McEwan, 2001: 355, italics mine] A little later we gradually understand that Briony at 77 still looks for a reparation to the mistake committed when she was 13, and the news of her imminent mental insanity is accepted (dreamt of?) as a form of rightful punishment to her false accusation. Hence, its compensatory role. Furthermore, in her perspective this likens her destiny to that of Robbie's (and Luc's) since finally she is forced to endure physical suffering, a dimension whose weight has dramatically taught her to keep in full consideration: "a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended" [McEwan, 2001: 287], is the hard lesson she has learned

¹² F. KERMODE. "Point of View: Review of *Atonement* by Ian McEwan", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 23 N° 19, 4 October 2001, p. 9.

from life. It is along these lines that the whole postscript of the novel should be read. The great importance that the awareness of disease has and, ultimately, its subtle association with death and war adds depth and pathos to the tale. In the very first lines of the final section, in fact, the now 77 year-old narrator introduces this equation by arguing that war is a “collective insanity” [McEwan, 2001: 353] and, obliquely, accepts elatedly her insanity as a form of reparation for her sense of guilt attached to the collective insanity. If throughout the novel, war is equated to death and peace to life, she reaches the conclusion that she accepts death for the compensatory effect it has on her conscience. Vascular dementia may not necessarily lead her towards death, but it is undeniably a death of her conscience, an extinction of her self, if not of her ego, and this cannot escape a self-centred personality such as Briony’s, who plainly claims: “I’m only dying then, I’m fading into unknowing.” [McEwan, 2001: 355] Also the epigrammatic, sharp, almost abrupt conclusion of the novel, “But now I must go to sleep” [McEwan, 2001: 372], seems to clearly allude to her imminent death, caused by vascular dementia. The network establishing connections among war, death and disease however does achieve full completion until McEwan decides to link all of these issues to the forthcoming publication of Briony’s novel, a material act of atonement cleansing her sense of guilt. The following passage, giving full breath to the narrator’s authorial and authoritative positioning, becomes possible only a few moments after she has disclosed the real truth about Robbie and Cecilia, and it connects her death to the publication of the novel to reparation perfectly:

When I am dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions. Briony will be as much of a fantasy as the lovers who shared a bed in Balham and enraged their landlady. No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. [McEwan, 2001: 371]

Expiation, from Briony’s point of view at least, becomes possible with both the writer’s death that finally levels her to the two lovers and, most importantly, with the publication of her novel. In other words, *Atonement* becomes her atonement. Yet, if the past mistake consisted of telling a lie and if the novel is now based on telling another lie, how can a compensation be truly achieved? Can a new lie

amend an old lie, remains the central Hamlet-like question around which the entire novel gravitates. Telling a lie is immoral, writing a novel not so, but McEwan's genius lies just in his way of making the connection between art and morality possible in Briony's mind, who declares: "If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book." [McEwan, 2001: 360]